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SUBJECT: FRANCOPHONE LIBERAL REYNDEERS EYES JUNE REGIONAL
ELECTIONS

11. Summary: In the upcoming June European and Regional elections, the Francophone Liberal (MR) party, led by Didier Reynders, seeks to become the number one party in the Walloon and Brussels regional governments. The MR's stronghold is Brussels, but Wallonia remains a contested area. Reynders has been focusing on strategies to ensure the best possible outcome. Concerned with a challenge by well-known, conservative Fleming Rudy Aernoudt's participation on the Francophone ballot, Reynders invited Aernoudt to join the MR ticket. This caused tension in the MR from its nationalist wing, the Francophone Democratic Front (FDF). Forced to choose between the FDF and Aernoudt, Reynders abruptly struck Aernoudt off the ticket. A second part of Reynders, strategy is to form a coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDH), who have remained committed to a coalition with the Socialists. End Summary.

RECENT FRANCOPHONE ELECTORAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

12. The MR has tried for decades to dislodge the Socialists from their position as the strongest party in Francophone Belgium. In the nineties, then MR leader Louis Michel, attempted to form a coalition with the CDH, but the effort never succeeded. Michel instead joined the federal and regional governments with the Socialists in 1999. In 2004, the MR continued its efforts to recruit defectors from the CDH, and thereby increase its numbers until the MR outnumbered the PS. As a result, Socialist Party (PS) President Elio Di Rupo considered forming a PS-CDH regional coalition that excluded the MR. The MR viewed this as a "betrayal" and began the continuing "open warfare" between the MR and PS. Tension between the two parties heightened when the PS lost the Namur and Charleroi municipal elections in 2006.

13. In the upcoming June 7 regional and European elections the Federal Deputy, Prime Minister, and Finance Minister Reynders hopes to make the MR the leading party in Wallonia and the Brussels region. In the 2004 Walloon regional elections the PS won 36.9 percent of the popular vote and the MR 24.3 percent; in the Brussels region the PS beat the MR by less than 1%. By 2007 the MR. In the 2007 federal elections, the MR defeated the PS in Wallonia 31.2 percent to 29.5 percent; in Brussels the MR outpolled the PS by a ten percent margin. The MR was helped by a series of political scandals among the PS in Wallonia. In June, the main area of contention will once again be Wallonia, where the MR will try to repeat its federal success at the regional level. The Brussels region has become an MR stronghold.

CURIOUS COMPETITION FROM A FLEMING

14. Reynders was confronted with an unusual electoral decision in 2008, when the fiercely pro-Belgian Fleming Rudy Aernoudt, who had moved to Wallonia, decided to run as a candidate in the Walloon regional and European elections. Aernoudt is well known for leaking revelations about his former boss, Flemish Regional Minister Fientje Moerman. After his exile from Flemish politics, he moved to Wallonia to become chief-of-staff to then MR Walloon Regional Minister of Economy Serge Kubla. Aernoudt is a conservative, free

enterprise advocate and is no real threat to Reynders' party, but Reynders did not want to take any chances on losing a few percentage points in the total vote and offered the popular Aernoudt a spot on his ticket. The Francophone nationalist wing of the MR in the Brussels region, the anti-Flemish Francophone Democratic Front (FDF), strongly opposed Aernoudt's addition to the MR list. The FDF is a relentless advocate of a greater (Francophone) Brussels capital region, to which Aernoudt is opposed. There are also significant differences between the FDF and Aernoudt on social policy. Forced to choose between the two, Reynders pulled Aernoudt off the MR ticket.

15. Comment: Reynders has long been considered one of the country's finest political strategists. However his erratic turn about in the Aernoudt episode, his handling of the financial crisis, and the criticism of the finance ministry and tax bureaucracy have tarnished his image. The brilliant strategist may have a problem defeating the Socialists decisively on the June 7. His recent problems might also make the CDH less comfortable with his dream MR-CDH coalition. Reynders could well end up swallowing his pride and reaching out to the Socialists on June 8 to form an MR-PS-CDH coalition.

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